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Good job !!

The Evolution of Cajun Cuisine

Introduction

For several years, the word “Cajun” has been applied to a variety of culinary dishes from blackened catfish to McDonald’s spicy chicken sandwiches. Millions of Americans have enthusiastically consumed these dishes; however, few know what makes (or what does not make) these dishes Cajun. To find the answer one must look at the region where this unique culture has developed over the last two hundred and fifty years—southwest Louisiana.

Acadians in Nova Scotia

The Cajun people are direct descendants of French settlers from the Acadia region of Nova Scotia. The term Cajun is a corruption of “Acadian,” the original word for this group. Nearly all Acadians in Louisiana are descended from the nearly 400 families relocated to Acadia from Normandy, LaRochelle, Brittany, Santonge, and Poitou. They were hardworking peasants who worked as yeoman farmers and fishermen. In the 1760s, Great Britain took possession of Acadia and renamed it Nova Scotia, bringing in settlers from Scotland and the Midlands.

The Acadians, in accordance with their reputation for stubborn independence, refused to pledge allegiance to Britain, become Anglican, or speak English. The British response to their refusal has since been referred to as “*Le Grand Derangement*” by the Acadians and is listed among history’s most tragic events. Suspicious of the French Acadians, the British decided to expel the entire population. They called a meeting in a chapel on September 5, 1755, drawing thousands of Acadian men, primarily from the village of Grand Pré. To their surprise, they were promptly arrested and put on ships. Over 7,000 people were displaced, with no regard for family

ties. The rest of the settlers, primarily women and children, were rounded up and sent on ships to scattered ports. Husbands and wives, mothers and children were separated, most never to be reunited. The village of Grand Pré was then burned to the ground.

By the completion of the British campaign, 25,000 people were dispersed to Maine, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, the Carolinas, Georgia, the French Indies, Santo Domingo, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Honduras, and the Falkland Islands. Another 3,000 returned to France. The Acadians were not always welcome in their new homes. In Georgia, for instance, they were sold into slavery and worked along with African slaves in the fields. Source?

In 1765, the first twenty Louisiana Acadians arrived in New Orleans where they were sent to the Attakapas area to settle. Others quickly followed, finding a kind reception from French and Spanish settlers already in the area. Soon word spread to the exiled families desperately searching for relatives that reunification was possible in Louisiana. Their numbers steadily grew until, 200 years later, they numbered over 600,000, the highest Acadian population in the world.

Acadians in Louisiana

The Acadians settled an area known as the “Acadian Coast” in Louisiana (see map). The land was swampy and riddled with bayous, with few roads leading in or out. As a result, their culture enjoyed a large degree of isolation until the modern highway system was built. Thus, their language (17th Century French) and customs were preserved.

This remote area also ensured that the culture was markedly different from the aristocratic Creole society in New Orleans. Where the Creoles were rich plantation owners, the Acadians were frugal farmers and fishermen, just as they had been in their homeland.

Displaying the same fierce independence that led to their exile, they refused to work on Creole plantations, choosing to maintain their own small farms instead.

The Acadia people adapted well to their new homes and quickly learned how to use available resources. They had large families, often with twenty children. They were a very social people and spent hours visiting with relatives and friends who later included the Native Americans, Spanish, and German immigrants who lived in the surrounding area. Their French ancestry, sociability, and new acquaintances combined to produce one of the most unique cuisines in the world—Cajun cooking.

The Elements of Cajun Cooking

The average person, if asked to define Cajun cooking, would likely comment on its spiciness and use of seafood, but that would hardly be a complete description. Cajun cooking has evolved from the simple peasant dishes of the early Acadians to the much-acclaimed, one-pot meals found in some of today's fanciest restaurants. The key element of the cuisine that has led to its current status is the confident experimentation of the Cajun cook. In fact, Howard Mitcham writes, "Creative improvisation is the keynote of Cajun cookery." (Mitcham, 1997)

If that same average person were asked to describe the differences between Creole cooking and Cajun cooking, he would probably shrug and say he did not realize there was a difference, as the two are often assumed to be one and the same. A close look reveals that the differences are as obvious as the differences between the two cultures. The Creoles of the New Orleans aristocracy base their meals on the pursuit of *haute cuisine*. They prefer separate sauces and delicate, albeit spicy, flavors. Their country cousins from Acadia prefer a more robust, one-pot meal, that is slow-cooked to perfection in a cast-iron pot. Cajun food is spicier and more daring. Creole dishes are characterized by the French cooking techniques of city chefs, blended

with their Spanish, Italian, and German neighbors. Creole tomatoes are a common ingredient and distinguish a Creole dish from a Cajun meal at a glance. The Cajuns used French peasant techniques and specialized in wild game, blended with Indian, African, Spanish, and German ingredients.

In order to fully explore the origins of Cajun cooking, perhaps it is best to look at several primary ingredients. These ingredients can be found in numerous combinations in virtually all Cajun dishes. Roux is the basis for nearly every Cajun meal outside of dessert. It is combined with rice, meat, peppers and herbs, culminating in an epicurean experience equaled by no other.

Roux

Roux is the fundamental base for the majority of Cajun meals. In Louisiana, it is a common joke that the first line in all recipes is, "First you make a roux.." It comes from the word "*roux bierre*" meaning, "reddish-brown butter." It was used in France for centuries by the peasant class, so it is not surprising to find it cooking in the kitchens of today's Acadians.

Roux is made by slowly heating equal parts of flour and butter (or another fat) until a dark brown chocolate color emerges. Creoles prefer a light cream colored roux, while Cajuns insist on a roux browned as deeply as possible without burning it. It is added to water or stocks to thicken gravies and to add a robust flavor to soups and stews. It also works as a natural preservative by slowing the spoiling process, an important consideration before modern refrigeration.

Rice

Rice is the second most common ingredient in Cajun cooking. It has been estimated that Cajuns eat nearly the same amount of rice per year as the Chinese. It is served at least twice a day, seven days a week.

Rice was not a grain grown in France or Acadia, and was not a major part of meals in the first part of the Acadian history in the New World. In fact, when the Acadians first settled Louisiana, corn, borrowed from friendly Choctaw Indians, was the staple of their diet. Rice was grown only as an insurance crop to protect against a corn crop failure. Later, in the 1920s, Midwestern immigrants brought steam-powered irrigation to the area, and rice replaced corn on Acadian tables. Today, more rice is grown in south Louisiana than in all other parts of the country combined.

Meat

It was not until the first settlers arrived in Acadia that meat was introduced to the Acadian kitchen. In France, meat was not a part of the typical peasant diet as it was reserved for the rich, since a lack of salt made it difficult to preserve. In Canada, the Acadians were faced with an abundance of wild game, fish, and shellfish, and they quickly took advantage of it. Pork was the favorite, although aged chickens were added to the pot when they no longer produced eggs. Despite the large herds of sheep the Acadians managed, they rarely ate mutton.

Following *Le Grand Derangement*, the Acadians were forced to rely on game and fish found in the swamps around their new homes. It is then that the Cajuns developed their reputation for “eating anything that doesn’t eat them first.” Common meats were fresh and saltwater fish, shrimp, crabs, crawfish, oysters, turtles, frogs, rabbits, deer, raccoons, opossums, snipes, grouse, wild turkey, ducks and geese. Seafood was not originally a large factor in their cooking, as busy Cajun farmers did not have the time to stop working in the fields and fish in the Gulf of Mexico. Later, when refrigeration was introduced, more seafood was available, and the Cajuns, in their typical fashion, created marvelous dishes to accommodate the new ingredients.

The German immigrants in the area taught the Acadians how to make sausages. They quickly added their own zesty spices to it, creating wonderful sausages such as *andouille* and *boudin*. No Cajun recipe collection is complete without chicken and *andouille* sausage gumbo or homemade *boudin*.

Peppers

One of the hallmarks of Cajun cuisine is the extensive use of peppers in everything from breakfast to late-night barroom competitions. Many of the peppers used originated with Spanish settlers that neighbored the Acadians. Today, Acadiana (the area around Lafayette and New Iberia) has been dubbed the “hot underbelly of America.” (Mitcham, 1997) Most of the peppers and hot sauces eaten in North America come from that area. The quality of the soil, hot sun, and humidity combine to make an ideal environment for pepper cultivation. Acadians include a row or two of peppers in nearly every small garden and family farm.

Avery Island, near New Iberia, Louisiana, is the world-renown home of Tobasco Pepper Sauce. There are 2,500 acres of tobasco peppers grown for the company among the salt domes found there. Edmund McIlhenny invented the sauce after a friend of his returning from the Mexican War gave him the pepper seeds. During the Civil War, Mr. McIlhenny sought to stretch the use of his peppers and he developed the now-famous sauce. Tobasco has since become a common ingredient in Acadian households.

Herbs

Cajuns make extensive use of herbs in all of their dishes. Some were common in Acadia, but the primary herbs in use today came from the Native Americans indigenous to the Louisiana swamps. *Filé* powder is the most common of these, given to the Acadians by Choctaw Indians. It is made by grinding sassafras leaves to a fine powder, and its primary use is to thicken stews

and gumbo. Cajun households commonly pass a bowl of *filé* around the table after gumbo is served, so that each person can take a pinch.

Okra

Okra is a vegetable that has a limited popularity in the United States. In south Louisiana, however, it is a common dish, served pickled, fried, or in gumbo. Okra is rumored to have made its way to America via slaves from Africa. They apparently hid the seeds in their ears during their long voyages to the New World and then planted it in their own small gardens. Because some Cajuns were slaves in certain areas of the south and were reduced to tenant farming with many freed slaves after the Civil War, it is easy to see how the vegetable made its way into Acadian homes.

Gumbo

All of these elements combine into a delightful dish that has become one of the most famous hallmarks of Cajun cooking—gumbo. It is derived from the French peasants' slowly cooked *pot-au-feu* and fish *bouillabaisse*. It also is linked to the Africans' communal pot of okra stew and the Choctaws' boiled crabs and shrimp. It is difficult to describe gumbo since no two people cook it the same way, and many argue for hours about what is a "real" gumbo. According to Howard Mitcham, "It is an improvisational thing, like early jazz. You just take off with whatever tune is handy, and then you travel. You throw in a lot of blue notes, flatted fifths, discords, and glissandos to spice it up, and the end result is almost always satisfying." (Mitcham, 1997)

The word "gumbo" is derived from the African word for okra. Cajun gumbo is distinguished from Creole versions by the use of both roux and okra (also, there are no tomatoes in Cajun gumbo). Gumbo was a practical meal, flexible enough to assimilate whatever the men

brought home from hunting excursions. Large pots of it were made to accommodate visitors, which were more common than not in the Acadian home. A skilled Cajun cook can throw together a tasty gumbo at a moment's notice if guests show up at the door. It is a Mardi Gras tradition for Cajuns on horseback to ride through a town, collecting ingredients for a large communal pot of gumbo.

Conclusion

Cajun cooking has taken several centuries to develop into the unique flavorful cuisine it is today. In effect, it is a gumbo of time and people, from French peasants to African slaves. Food has long been a central part of the lives and customs of the people of southwest Louisiana. A visiting Illinoisan once remarked to Harnett T. Kane, "You folks down here not only swallow and digest your food with a wonderful enjoyment, but you pleasure yourselves talking and arguing about it, from the ideal combination of herbs to the finest way to mix meats and fish with everything else imaginable." (Feibleman, 1971)

Of course, the isolation once afforded by the swamps and bayous of Louisiana has been broken down by highways and the Internet. Cajun families now often rely on two incomes, reducing the amount of time Cajun cooks have to experiment and develop their cuisine. Some are concerned that this unique aspect of Acadian life will go the way of the Cajun language, lost in a few years. However, the Cajun has shown through the centuries a tenacity and stubborn refusal to let go of his culture. It is likely that this spirit will ensure Cajun cooking traditions are passed on to the next generation so that many years from now, it will still be possible to get a steaming bowl of delicious gumbo.

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Louisiana Quick Facts

Southwest LA / Acadiana

Capital	Baton Rouge
Area	47,751 sq mi 123,675 sq km
Population	4,351,769 (July 1997 est.)
Major Cities	New Orleans (476,625), Baton Rouge (215,882), Shreveport (191,558), Lafayette (104,899), Kenner (72,345)
Major Rivers	Mississippi, Red, Pearl, Sabine, Ouachita
Highest Point	Driskill Mt. 535 feet 163 meters
Industry	chemicals, petroleum products, food processing, transportation equipment, paper products, tourism, seafood
Agriculture	seafood, cotton, soybeans, beef cattle, sugarcane, poultry, dairy products, rice
Minerals and Resources	natural gas, petroleum, fishing, salt, construction sand and gravel, sulfur

